

HERPES, GENITAL



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

A virus infection of the genitals transmitted by sexual relations (intercourse or oral sex). It can affect sexually active males and females and may involve the vagina, cervix, thighs, buttocks (sometimes) and penis. Genital herpes is often found in the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Painful blisters, preceded by itching, burning or irritation on the vaginal lips or penis. In women, the blisters may extend into the vagina to the cervix and urethra. After a few days, the blisters rupture and leave painful, shallow ulcers that last 1 to 3 weeks.
- Difficult, painful urination.
- Enlarged lymph glands.
- Fever and a general ill feeling.

CAUSES

- Herpes type 2 virus (HSV-2). Herpes type 1 virus (HSV-1) causes common cold sores, which appear around the mouth, but can sometimes cause genital herpes.
- Genital herpes is transmitted by a sexual partner who has active herpes lesions. Lesions may be on the genitals, hands, lips or mouth (including type 1 virus). Once transmitted, incubation period is 2 to 7 days. Sometimes, the infection can be acquired without any symptoms only to have a delayed outbreak.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Serious illness that has lowered resistance.
- Use of immunosuppressive or anticancer drugs.
- Stress (increases susceptibility to a primary infection or a recurrence). Stress may lead to diminished efficiency of the immune responses that usually suppress growth of the virus.
- Smoking.
- Other "triggers" that can cause a recurrence include genital trauma, menstruation, sunbathing, and existing infection of some other type.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Avoid sexual intercourse if either partner has blisters or sores.
- Use a rubber condom during intercourse if either sex partner has inactive genital herpes (especially important if the infected partner has frequent recurrences).
- Avoid oral sex with a partner who has cold sores on the mouth.
- If you are pregnant, tell your doctor if you have had herpes or any genital lesions in the past. Precautions should be taken to prevent infection of the baby.
- Avoid stress where possible.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Genital herpes is currently considered incurable, but symptoms and recurrence can be relieved with treatment.
- During symptom-free periods, the virus returns to its dormant state. Symptoms recur when the virus is reactivated. Recurrent symptoms are not new infections.

- The discomfort varies from person to person and from time to time in the same person. The first herpes infection is much more uncomfortable than following ones.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Generalized disease and death in persons who must take anticancer drugs or immunosuppressive drugs.
- Transmittal of life-threatening systemic herpes to a newborn infant from an infected mother.
- Secondary bacterial infection.



TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Diagnosis is usually determined by the appearance of the lesions, however, confirmation may be made by a laboratory study of fluid from the lesion.
- Treatment is directed toward relieving symptoms and preventing complications.
- Women should wear cotton underpants or pantyhose with a cotton crotch.
- To reduce pain during urination, women may urinate in a shower, or urinate through a tubular device, such as a toilet-paper roll or plastic cup with the end cut out or pour a cup of warm water over genitals while urinating.
- Warm baths with a tablespoon of salt added can ease some of the discomfort caused by the blisters.
- Consider life-style changes to avoid emotional stress.
- Women should have an annual Pap smear and physical examination to rule out any complications.
- Additional information is available from the Herpes Resource Center, P.O. Box 13827, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709, (919) 361-8488.

MEDICATIONS

- Antiviral medications in oral form are often prescribed for treatment of initial episodes and management of recurrent genital herpes. For some patients, they may be prescribed for prevention purposes. A topical form is available, but is not as effective.
- Use mild painkillers, such as acetaminophen.

ACTIVITY

Avoid intercourse until symptoms disappear.

DIET

No special diet.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of genital herpes.
- Symptoms don't improve in 1 week, despite treatment.
- Symptoms worsen, despite treatment.
- Unusual vaginal bleeding or swelling occurs.
- Fever returns during treatment or you become generally ill.